

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Gordon Parks, Photographer and Writer



I picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapons against what I hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance, poverty.

There are many ways to fight racism, intolerance, and poverty. You can peacefully protest or work in government to make changes. You can start your own nonprofit organization or donate money to one. Gordon Parks, however, chose a camera for his weapon. His photos showed people the racism, intolerance, and poverty that existed in the United States.

Gordon Parks was born in Kansas on November 3, 1912. He was the youngest of 15 children. When he was still a teen, his mother passed away. Parks went to live with an older sister. Unfortunately, this did not last long, and soon Parks was living on his own.

Parks took odd jobs for the next decade. He was a pianist, a singer in a band, a railroad porter, a waiter, and a busboy. Whenever he was not working, he would read in order to learn new information. While he was working on a train, he picked up a magazine that had a photo-essay about migrant workers. Parks was fascinated. He knew that he wanted to take pictures like this one day.

Parks started reading all about photography so he could teach himself how to take amazing pictures. In 1938, Gordon Parks bought his first camera. At first he just did portraits and fashion shoots. But he knew he wanted to do more. He wanted to document real life. Later, he would tell people that he, "...picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapons against what I

hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance, poverty." He headed to Chicago and took photos that showed poverty and racism on the city's south side. These photos landed him a job with the Farm Security Association in Washington D.C. He was the first African American photographer for this government organization. While working at FSA, Gordon Parks continued to take pictures that showed poverty, racism, and other social issues. One of his most famous photographs, *American Gothic*, was of Ella Watson, a grandmother who worked as a cleaner in an office.

Gordon Parks began working for the magazines *Vogue* and *Life*. He became the first African American photographer to work for *Life* magazine. As a photojournalist for *Life*, Parks took pictures of Black Muslim Movement, the Black Panthers, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Not content with just taking pictures, Gordon Parks was also a writer. He wrote novels, memoirs, and poems. He turned his first novel, *The Learning Tree*, into a movie. He was the first African American to write and direct a major Hollywood movie.

Although Gordon Parks never graduated from high school or went to college, he has over 50 honorary degrees. Parks died in 2006, but his legacy of photography remains.

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1. Give an example from the text that supports the statement that Gordon liked to read.

2. Explain how you know that Gordon Parks was committed to making the world a better place. Use text evidence.

3. Give an example from the text that supports the statement that Gordon Parks had tenacity.

4. How did Gordon Parks use a camera as a weapon against racism, intolerance, and poverty?
